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AUTHOR Honey, John
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ABSTRACT

The characteristics of the standard and non-standard varieties of English as spoken as a first language in Britain are discussed. The discussion focuses on 20 comparisons made between the standard and non-standard varieties. It is suggested that many of the local forms of English and the international standard English constitute a potential enrichment of the speaker's expressiveness, and it is important to recognize opportunities of genre, style, and register that make such usage appropriate. An over-riding goal, however, is the necessity to achieve a local standard that is close enough in intelligibility to the international standard and to arrest the further fragmentation of the English language in the world. It is concluded that the likelihood of achieving this goal has immeasurably increased with the development of forms of classroom technology (i.e., videos, etc.) that bypass teachers whose own use of an internationally intelligible variety of English is defective and who provide a poor model for their pupils. (JL)

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The concept of 'standard English' in first and second language contexts

John Honey

For several decades now, standard languages have had a bad press, at least within the community of academic linguistics. They have been attacked as instruments of colonial oppression, of class exploitation, of racial injustice. And there have been those who would query whether standard varieties exist in any definable sense at all.

Against this background, it is important that we should remind ourselves of the main characteristic functions which respectively distinguish the standard and non-standard varieties of a language. In what follows, I write with reference to the characteristics of the standard and non-standard varieties of English as spoken as mother-tongue in Britain. My comparisons are not intended to suggest an absolute or 'either/or' distinction between the two categories, but rather to make a set of rough but pertinent generalisations.

(1) In English the standard variety (S) is multi-functional; non-standard (NS) varieties of the language have strictly limited functions. (2) Among the many functions of S are those which relate to its use as the language of formal education and for the processing of all the forms of information required in a modernised society, but it also can be, and is, used for purposes of informal personal relationships and, in certain contexts, to express forms of group solidarity. Among the limited but important functions of NS are its very obvious uses in intimate personal relationships and in expressing the solidarity of particular groups; it has specific limitations as a language of education. (3) S is available for use in the communication of both concrete and abstract meanings; NS is typically used for concrete rather than abstract meanings. (4) S is used for both written and spoken modes, NS is essentially used for the spoken mode. (5) S is used for formal styles of communication but is also used in informal styles; NS tends to be used only in informal styles. (6) Discourse in S is both planned and spontaneous; in NS it is usually spontaneous. (7) S is characterised by low redundancy, NS by a high proportion of redundancy. (8) An utterance in S tends to be explicit, in NS to be 'assumptive', in the sense that para-linguistic and extra-linguistic phenomena are available to amplify the message and to signal the presence of shared assumptions unstated in the text. (9) The lexicon of S is vast, that of NS is by comparison very limited. (10) S carries notions of 'correctness', and with them the potential for linguistic insecurity for its speakers; NS carries little or no notion of 'correctness' and so, within its own system, a corresponding absence of linguistic insecurity. (11) S has a tendency to stability, e.g. in its

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grammar; NS may have less stability. (12) S is more analytic; in NS, analysis is "a high-risk procedure". (13) Discourse in S may be characterised by a high degree of objectivity; in NS, such objectivity is less typical. (14) S is a host to linguistic parasites; NS is a parasite. (15) S can be used to express authority and power, as well as humility and social concern; NS is strong as the language of compassion but weak in achieving control in ways which might operationalise that compassion.

Above all, (16) S is codified, NS uncodifed, and, in consequence, (17) S can be both taught and learned, but NS is not in practice available to be formally taught. This makes (18) S inclusive and open, but NS exclusive and closed, and (19) S the language of the wider society, the mainstream, but NS the language of narrow particularism, what in other contexts we would see as the ghetto, the tribe, the in-group. (A 20th comparison is considered below.)

Several of the above comparisons are arguable, most need amplification or qualification, and I would not suggest they carry equal weight. But at any rate their collective import should redress the imbalance of recent discussions within linguistics about standard languages; moreover the above is only a selection of factors, and there are further comparisons which could be made which illustrate S's advantages. In general, S has shown itself to be more serviceable for a far wider range of functions than NS, though on the positive side we notice the strength of NS as a language of solidarity, and its relative advantage in not creating linguistic insecurity. Even the former of these, however, may be less admirable when we look at the value-systems of the forms of minority-group solidarity which NS is often used to express, which may include forms of racism, sexism, criminality, hostility to education, and so on. To those who claim that all languages and varieties are readily adaptable, and that there is no inherent reason why NS cannot be developed for use as the main vehicle for learning within formal education systems, we have to answer that part of the raison d'etre of some forms of NS is that they are the focus of anti-intellectualism or resistance to education, and that by adapting to perform educational or intellectual functions they would lose that raison d'etre.

Many of the characteristics listed derive from the important function of S as the language of literacy. It was one of my teachers at Cambridge, Professor Jack Goody, who with his collaborator Ian Watt was to initiate in 1968 a debate in the social sciences which has not yet run its course. The importance of their case was in pointing to the new possibilities for intellectual growth which had been opened up, historically, by the literate culture of ancient Greece, including a new kind of logical method, and new ways of classifying knowledge (Goody & Watt 1968). It was then the task of the American psychologist Jerome Bruner (1972) to show how the coming of written text had been the precondition for new forms of reflective thinking, and that these new forms have enormous potential effect in 'amplifying' thought processes that would otherwise remain limited in scope.

Further cognitive implications of literate language were postulated in the 1970s in Canada by the educationist David Olson, which led him to claim, for written and for oral language respectively, the existence of two quite different structures of knowledge and two different ways of being intelligent (see e.g. Olson 1977). In the 1970s and '80s the American Jesuit scholar Walter J Ong discussed the wide-ranging implications of the intervention of literacy in "transforming human consciousness" and enabling the individual to realise intellectual and other goals which were previously unattainable (Ong 1982). It is the cumulative evidence of researchers such as these in ascribing to literacy the capacity decisively to influence basic cognitive processes, including logical method, that provides us with item (20) on our list of characteristics of S compared with NS, and in claiming there is a *qualitative* difference between S and NS. This does not mean that any specific utterance by a speaker of S must, by definition, carry implications of cognitive difference from an utterance by a speaker of NS, but only that an overall potential for difference between the two varieties, S and NS, exists by virtue of this quality.

To write thus is to dispute more than twenty years of near-consensus in academic linguistics in the English-speaking world, during which the formulation (widely influential in the 1960s) by the British sociolinguist Basil Bernstein of a theory of linguistic deficit, i.e. of qualitative differences in the language 'codes' of specific groups of S and NS speakers of British English, was apparently overturned by the devastating demonstration by the American sociolinguist William Labov (1969/72) that such a deficit (examined in this case in respect of a Black American NS variety) was illusory. However, the enthusiasm which greeted that demonstration must now be tempered (a) by consideration of crucial weaknesses in Labov's case which have been suggested by critics (Honey 1983; Cooper 1984); (b) by the wider discussion (see above) of the qualitative implications of S varieties as languages of literacy; and (c) by new evidence on the 'lexical deficit' ascribed to some forms of NS (see especially the important work of the Australian linguist David Corson, 1983, 1985).

The emergence of any one dialect into the position of Standard is primarily due to extra-linguistic - essentially geographical, social, political, cultural and economic - factors (see Joseph 1987). Amid the welter of competing dialects in 15th century England, one dialect arrived at a position of primacy, which was soon reinforced by the introduction of printing. Once this process of emergence has taken place, the range of intellectual functions which the standard dialect develops, and above all its growth as the main vehicle of literacy, increases exponentially, especially after access to it has been opened up to the masses by a system of universal and compulsory education, such as happened in Britain in the 19th century. The proliferation of mass media - the popular daily press in the late Victorian period, a national radio service in the 1920s and a widely accessible TV service from the 1950s - provided further mechanisms for the

unchallengeable dominance of the standard dialect. In the light of all the many functions I have enumerated, it is easier to see the facilitation of maximum access to Standard as an act of liberation and empowerment, rather than as exploitation or oppression.

The path to dominance entailed another mechanism: codification, from the school grammar books of the Tudor period onwards (see Michael 1987), to the influential dictionaries of Dr Samuel Johnson and his successors. Such codification is never complete - it is less total for English than for, for example, French, where the process is supposedly formalised and ensured by an 'academy' (though the reality may be very different). The recurrent problem is that of recognising and incorporating linguistic change: a careful look at a few pages of a Jane Austen novel will remind us of the very significant proportions of lexical, grammatical, semantic and idiomatic change that have taken place over two centuries. The effective codification of standard English involves the consensus of educated opinion, which serves as a filter to the acceptance of new forms promoted mainly by the mass media and, generally after a time-lag of a few years, recognised by dictionaries, pedagogic grammars, and (much later) by school teachers and examiners. Thus there is always a degree of imprecision - amounting to perhaps a fraction of one per cent of the typical daily utterances of a classroom teacher or the total word-length of a British daily newspaper - as to what is or is not 'standard English' or 'correct English', but this does not entitle us to query the very existence of a standard variety, since, as I have written elsewhere, we do not fall into the trap of denying the existence of a standard version of anything simply because in its purest form it is difficult to define or measure (Honey 1985).

So far, I have written of the relationship of S to NS language as though there were some kind of absolute cut-off between the two varieties, but of course this is an over-simplification. On one dimension, the relationship is much better illustrated by the notion - developed in North America by the work of William A. Stewart (1965) and Derek Bickerton (1971) - of a spectrum or 'cline', on which three main relationships to standardness, either in respect of a dialect or of one of its components (e.g. accent) can be located by a general area along a line, with the 'acrolect' being the most standard, and the highest-prestige, form:

Acrolect Mesolect Basilect

and with infinite gradations in between. (For British English, the acrolect is Standard English spoken in RP; basilects are the present surviving forms of the historic dialects of Britain; mesolects represent the intermediate speech forms used by the majority of citizens.) My own application of this notion to the description of the relationship of the different forms of **accent** within Britain has drawn attention to the usefulness of identifying two other positions on this scale:

first, an area to the left of the acrolect to represent what I have called the 'hyperlect', an accent or dialect especially associated with social privilege or pretension, and capable of arousing resentment or ridicule among outsiders. And secondly and a point, called the 'paralect', immediately to the right of the acrolect, which acknowledges the truism that extended education tends to carry speakers of English leftwards along this scale, away from regional accents and towards the acrolect accent (RP), but points out that many speakers who make this linguistic journey stop fractionally short of pure RP and retain tiny traces of their regional origins in their otherwise standard accent (see Honey 1985, 1989).

Another of my teachers at Cambridge in the 1950s, the anthropologist Sir Edmund Leach, liked to claim that the relative prestige of languages or dialects followed from "very simple economic causes", since it is "advantageous for the individual to identify himself linguistically with those who possess political and economic influence" (see also Leach 1954). Other writers in recent years have severely criticised the norms and 'correctness' notions of standard languages as being a means of suppression serving to reproduce the power structures of capitalist societies (see the references in Bartsch 1986, xii).

We can now recognise, however, that these analyses may misrepresent the matter. In many societies, including Britain, and in many periods of history, the ruling classes have not, characteristically, spoken the acrolect: they have spoken a special and distinct variety of it (i.e. the hyperlect), or they may even (as in Czarist Russia) have spoken a different language altogether. What characterises the S form of the language - the acrolect - is above all else its connexion with education and, by association, with the quality of educatedness. For this reason, it is helpful for us to recognise, along with the categories **dialect** (defined by region) and **sociolect** (defined by social class) a third category, defined by experience of education. For this I borrow the term pioneered by the distinguished Filipino linguist Brother Andrew Gonzalez, **edulect** (see Gonzalez in Gonzalez and Bautista 1986, and elsewhere).

In Britain, while RP constitutes the acrolect in England, there are alternative regional models of educated speech provided by the locally-rooted intelligentsia in Scotland and (to some extent) in Wales.

Furthermore, within Scotland and Wales, locals who have adapted their speech to RP are regarded by their neighbours and colleagues as speaking the hyperlect, which has connotations of affectation and social pretension.

This phenomenon can also be observed among native speakers of English outside Britain. In Australia, whose educated classes were long fed by, and to some extent dominated by, a constant infusion of graduates from Britain, RP was for long held up within the educational system as the model for the 'correct' accent, and until recently dominated the broadcasting media. But with the emergence of a locally-based intelligentsia of academics and highly educated professionals, there evolved an educated (or 'cultivated') Australian accent,

which for Australia must now be regarded as the acrolect. Again, those Australians who speak RP (the acrolect in Britain) are now regarded by their compatriots as speaking what in Australia is the hyperlect. In both these examples, what is crucial in identifying the acrolect is not power or wealth, but the association of a linguistic variety with local perceptions of 'educatedness'.

In the 1990s, most people who speak or learn English are not mother-tongue speakers of any variety of it. Of those who are, a numerical majority for much of this century have been speakers of the American variety, characterised by small differences (compared with British English) of vocabulary and idiom, minute differences of grammar, and an easily observable set of regular and systematic differences of pronunciation. L2 learners of English around the world are faced with a choice between these two main models, or, in the case of parts of the world previously ruled by Britain or the USA, faced with an educational system in which one of these varieties was already established. In most parts of Asia (e.g. the subcontinent of India, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, etc.) this has meant British English, and in the Philippines, long under US rule or influence since 1898, this has meant American English, which was also influential in Japan immediately after 1945.

But wherever, for reasons of past political domination, either British English or American English has become well-established in the educational system, there has grown up a distinctive local variety which, in the mouths of local teachers and learners, has taken on a life of its own.

The Englishes of the subcontinent of India, with well over a hundred years of flourishing life, are a classic example of this process of indigenisation which has, for totally understandable reasons, produced so substantial a degree of variation from standard British English that commentators have been led to predict the fragmentation of the English language world-wide, on the analogy of Latin at the end of the Roman Empire.

It becomes a central issue both of language planning and of practical classroom teaching to determine how to accommodate such differences, which now affect the teaching of English in every part of the world (not least South East Asia) where English has been sufficiently long established in the school system for a recognisable local variety to have emerged. Extending our earlier analysis of S and NS varieties in terms of their characteristic functions, we can state the following:

1. Standard English, in either its British or its American variety, has become recognised as the language of international communication and all citizens have a right to learn it in a form which is sufficiently close to ensure intelligibility.

2. Standard English is also the means of access to the resources of knowledge and information which are more widely available in this than in any other language.

3. Local varieties of English contain differences which, where they are substantial, may hinder their speakers in respect of the functions specified in (1) and (2).

4. It is unrealistic to expect that any method of English language teaching, however well-resourced, will eradicate all traces of such local differences and produce local speakers of an AmE or BrE acrolect.

5. The presence of some reflection of such local differences in the speech of local speakers of English performs an important function in asserting pride in a local identity, and the total absence of such features, e.g. in the speaker's accent, causes the speaker to be regarded as hyperlectal. (What we saw in the case of Australia also holds true for Singapore, for the Philippines, and for many parts of the world where English has been long established: a 'pure' acrolectal (British or US) accent in the mouth of a local speaker is perceived as hyperlectal.)

6. The crucial component of acceptability is likely to be the association of a language variety with 'educatedness'. The local differences from the international standard which are most likely to resist pressures to uniformity are those which are modelled on the speech of the most educated local speakers, i.e. in Gonzalez's term, the local *edulect.*

7. At the same time, the other important functional component must not be lost sight of: the requirement that speakers of this variety be internationally intelligible, a criterion important in the new century as never before. The new target variety is thus likely to represent, in relation to the acrolect of the mother-tongue speaker of BrE or AmE, a position similar to that of the paralect - i.e. a set of sometimes tiny differences (of accent, grammar, lexis etc.) which nevertheless serve to assert the speaker's separate regional identity. Such differences should not involve the reduction of crucial phonemic or semantic contrasts.

8. A condition of effective access to a target variety is that it be codified. It is therefore essential that educators in all school systems where a local variety of English has developed should decide authoritatively what constitutes the local edulect, and make provision for its regular review to identify and incorporate change. They must also promulgate their codification and provide teaching

materials which make their defined code accessible, and they must take steps to make it operative throughout the educational system, especially at the level of public examinations and by the promotion of its use in the mass media.

Many of the differences between local forms of English and the international standard English constitute a potential enrichment of the speaker's expressiveness and it will be important to recognise opportunities of genre, style and register which make such uses appropriate. An over-riding goal, however, must be to achieve a local standard which is close enough in intelligibility to the international standard and to arrest the further fragmentation of the English language in the world, which can only disadvantage those whose life-chances depend on events, ideas, contacts and opportunities beyond the confines of their immediate community. The likelihood of achieving this goal has immeasurably increased with the development of forms of classroom technology (e.g. videos, etc.) which bypass teachers whose own use of an internationally intelligible variety of English is defective and who provide a poor model in this respect for their pupils, though it has to be admitted that L2 English teaching even in the richer countries of the world shows little use so far of these resources.

I end with a story. It comes from Singapore, but in fact it reflects a type of situation which could have happened in many other countries. It was there that I was recently introduced to an intelligent young man who, as is now not uncommon for some Singaporeans, had spent a period of his secondary education in Britain at a very good school, and had emerged speaking English in a form close to British English but retaining sufficient features to confirm that he was in fact Singaporean. He had interrupted his education to return home for nearly three years in order to complete his military service before going on to university in the United Kingdom. I asked him how he had got on with his fellow-recruits, in view of the fact that he had missed out on several years of schooling with his Singapore peer-group. Extremely well, he said, but there was one unexpected phenomenon. He had had to get used to the fact that many of the other cadets, especially the less educated ones, would approach him for help with a variety of personal problems which he felt he had no special experience in solving. His fellow-rankers all came to him, he discovered, because the way he spoke English caused them to have confidence that he possessed the wisdom and expertise to be able to help them.

NOTE: My thinking on these issues, especially as they relate to English as L2, benefited from my three months as Visiting Scholar at the Institute of Education, Singapore, 1987, and from a shorter period as guest of De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines March-April 1990. Neither institution is responsible for the uses to which I have put such thinking.

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